



### **Obituary of Prof Albert Eicker (1935-2018)**

It was with much sadness that we learnt of the passing of our friend, colleague and mentor, Professor Albert Eicker, on 6 January 2018. Prof Eicker was a founder member of the South African Association of Botanists (SAAB) and President of the Association from 1993–1995. He is best remembered as a prominent mycologist with a special interest in the taxonomy of especially southern African hyphomycetes and basidiomycetous macrofungi, as well as an internationally recognised authority on the biology and commercial cultivation of edible mushrooms. He served the University of Pretoria (UP) with distinction for more than three decades from 1968–1999, initially as Senior Lecturer in the Department of Botany and later as Full Professor and Head of the Department. Towards the end of his career he was also Acting Dean in the Faculty of Biological and Agricultural Sciences for a number of years. He married Kittie Strydom in 1961 and they had two children, Robert (Robbie) and Marisa. Kittie sadly passed away in 2005 and Robbie in 2008. For the past twelve years, however, Albert had found happiness again with his second wife Marina van Vuuren (née Odendaal). He is survived by his wife, daughter, two stepsons, a stepdaughter and eight grandchildren.

Albert Eicker was born on 16 September 1935 in Dannhauser, KwaZulu-Natal and growing up as a farm boy in the Amajuba District, he was fluent not only in Afrikaans and English, but also in isiZulu. After matriculating from the Glencoe High School he moved on to the then Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education (PU for CHE; now part of North West University) where he obtained his BSc degree in 1957, majoring in Botany and Geography, both with distinction. According to class-mate Fanus Booysen (retired headmaster of Lichtenburg High School), Albert was the ‘bright one’ in the class and many of his classmates used his notes to prepare for tests and exams! In 1958 Albert was awarded a post-graduate merit bursary from the Brewers Institute of South Africa and at the end of that year he completed his BSc Hons (with mycology as major), *cum laude*, from the same University. He completed his MSc degree under Prof Max Papendorf in 1960 and in 1968 his DSc degree (both from the PU for CHE). His doctoral studies were partially funded by a prestigious British Council Scholarship which allowed him to spend six months in the United Kingdom, working under the guidance of Prof Charles Chesters at the University of Nottingham.

His academic career began as a lecturer in Botany at the University of the Orange Free State (1959–1960), from where he moved on to the University of Zululand as Senior Lecturer and Head of the Department of Botany from 1961–1967. In 1968 he was appointed Senior

Lecturer in the Department of Botany at the University of Pretoria, where promotion to Associate Professor followed in 1977. Full Professorship was awarded in 1983 and in 1986 he was appointed as Head of the Department of Botany at that University, a position he held with distinction until his retirement in 1999. He received University awards and grants for exceptional academic achievement on a number of occasions. Between 1994 and 1996 he also served as Acting Dean in the Faculty of Biological and Agricultural Sciences for almost three years. After his retirement he ventured from the academic into the business world, setting up a business producing exotic mushroom spawn for the local market.

Prof Eicker's initial research interests centred on ecological and biodiversity studies of the mycoflora of South African soils. However, a study on the thermophilic fungi associated with the cultivation of the commercial cultivated mushroom, *Agaricus bisporus* (J.E.Lange) Imbach (results published in 1977), sparked a lasting and career-changing interest in the biology and cultivation of edible mushrooms. Although not his only interest, the commercial cultivation of edible mushrooms remained a first and foremost passion for the rest of his research career. His research in this field and close ties with the mushroom industry soon saw him becoming a world-renowned expert in various aspects of mushroom science. His involvement in the mushroom industry took him across the globe as invited speaker at various scientific gatherings. In 1984 he was invited as Visiting Professor to the Department of Plant Pathology at the Pennsylvania State University in the USA and in 1990 to the National Taiwan University, Republic of China. He was a founder member of the South African Mushroom Farmers Association (SAMFA) and editor of 'The Spawn Run', the association's newsletter. He also represented SAMFA on the Council of the International Society for Mushroom Science (ISMS). In recognition for his significant contribution to further the science and cultivation of edible fungi, honorary life membership of both SAMFA and ISMS were awarded to him in 1996 and 2008 respectively.

Apart from his work involving mushroom cultivation, Prof Eicker's extensive collaboration with Dr Robert Sinclair and Prof Gareth Morgan-Jones from the Auburn University, Alabama, contributed significantly to our current knowledge of the South African aquatic and other hyphomycetes. A long and fruitful collaboration with the renowned British mycologist Dr Derek Reid from Kew, whom he sponsored and hosted at UP for several research visits, also resulted in a significant advance of our knowledge of the South African basidiomycetous macrofungi. He also worked closely with long standing friend and colleague Dr GCA (Deon) van der Westhuizen, with whom he co-authored the 'Field Guide to the Mushrooms of Southern Africa'. His collaboration with Dr GJMA Gorter resulted in valuable work on the South African powdery mildew fungi (Erysiphales).

Several MSc and PhD students completed their studies under his guidance and watchful eye and their combined work resulted in more than 175 peer-reviewed publications in scientific journals, as well as numerous popular scientific articles and conference presentations. He was a very inspiring, accommodating and approachable study leader and long-lasting friendships were forged between him and his postgraduate students. His influence as co-author/contributor of four introductory botany textbooks in Afrikaans (*Algemene Plantkunde; Praktiese Plantsistematiek; Plantkunde: Genetika en Kriptogame; Praktiese Plantsistematiek Deel I: Die Kriptogame*) should also not be underestimated and would have left a significant imprint on the lives and eventual careers of many of the users thereof. Regular talks to various non-scientific groups and the field guide on the identification of Southern African mushrooms were important tools in taking his message beyond the academic sphere. His role

in this respect contributed to creating a greater awareness of the importance and beauty of the ‘fifth kingdom’ amongst the general public of South Africa.

Albert Eicker was an active member of many learned societies, including the British Mycological Society, the New York Academy of Science, the Indian Society for Mushroom Science and the *Association pour l’Etude Taxonomique de la Flora d’Afrique Tropical* to mention but a few. He was a full member of the *Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskap en Kuns* (South African Academy for Science and Arts), a founder member and Vice President of The African Mycological Association (1995–19??) and as already mentioned above, Honorary Life Member of both SAMFA and ISMS. He also served as advisor and/or committee member or chair for many organisations such as the National Food Research Institute of the CSIR, the International Union of Biological Sciences, the Joint Matriculation Board, the National State Library, the Transvaal Museum and the South African Council for Natural Scientific Professions.

Apart from the numerous awards bestowed upon him in the course of his academic career (some already mentioned above) his contribution to mycology in South Africa was also recognised by the South African Academy of Science and Arts by honouring him with the prestigious Havenga Prize for Agricultural Sciences in 1999.

Although mushrooms were his passion, Albert Eicker was also an avid wood-worker and his house was adorned by many a beautiful piece crafted by his masterly hands. When time allowed, he loved to escape to the little seaside resort of Vleesbaai near Mossel Bay, where his holiday home was aptly named ‘Kampernoelie’ (a Dutch word for mushroom) and where a lasting legacy to him will always be the street names in the new extension, for which he was responsible, uncharacteristically not naming them after mushrooms, but indigenous trees!

Albert Eicker was an inspiration and role model for many of us. We certainly cherish his memory.

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